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Better publicizing the work and decisions of the General Assembly

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, prepared in response to General Assembly resolution 58/126 of 19 December 2003, describes the current activities of the Department of Public Information to publicize the work and decisions of the Assembly and presents recommendations for developing a communications strategy to publicize them further.

At present, the Department of Public Information undertakes both coverage of the daily news generated by the meetings of the General Assembly and activities that promote the major issues on the United Nations agenda. This coverage could be augmented by a media campaign that highlights the importance of the Assembly. Should a formal communications strategy be developed, the questions of staffing, web site and relations with the media would have to be addressed. The report concludes by calling for a closer working relationship between the Office of the President of the General Assembly and the Department.

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I. Introduction

1. In paragraph 8 of the annex to its resolution 58/126 of 19 December 2003, the General Assembly decided that the work and decisions of the Assembly should be better publicized, and that the support provided by the Department of Public Information of the Secretariat should be intensified and strengthened. It also requested the Secretary-General to present a plan to that end, within existing resources, to the Committee on Information at its twenty-sixth session. The present report is prepared in response to that request.

2. There is no doubt that the work and decisions of the General Assembly do not, as a rule, receive wide media coverage. Since the late 1940s and 1950s, when the Assembly's deliberations were the subject of daily news dispatches in the major world media, there has been a significant decline. Journalists and editors explain that the work of the Assembly tends to be seen as routine, repetitive and formulaic and that its decisions are difficult to relate to the lives of ordinary readers, listeners and viewers. The challenge of promoting the Assembly to the world media is therefore a significant one.

3. Traditionally, it is the opening of the General Assembly and the general debate, with the large number of heads of State and Government who participate, that attracts the most media attention during the Assembly's annual session. The opening day of the general debate receives wide global attention, and national media invariably report the interventions of their own country's head of delegation. Special sessions of the Assembly and other high-level meetings also attract international media coverage. The high-level meeting of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS, held in September 2003, generated widespread media coverage. This coverage was the result of a carefully implemented media strategy by the Department of Public Information in collaboration with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) that included production and wide dissemination of embargoed background information, advance contacts with leader writers, producers and researchers, and the provision of background briefings for correspondents. Other important discussions of the Assembly, especially those on contentious subjects such as cloning or Palestine, also receive international media coverage. It seems that wire services, major newspapers and television networks are now giving more attention to the long-term global issues that are the main focus of the Assembly. Nevertheless, such coverage could be augmented by a media campaign to explain to the world why the Assembly is important. Such a campaign, as part of a broader communications strategy on the Assembly, could help generate more and positive coverage of its work.

II. Activities of the Department of Public Information to publicize the work and decisions of the General Assembly

4. The Department of Public Information currently undertakes a great number of activities to promote the work of the General Assembly. These include both coverage of the daily news generated by the meetings of the Assembly and activities that promote the major issues on the United Nations agenda. These priority issues are identified through the annual Assembly resolution on questions relating to information and through the Department's strategic communications planning with

"client" substantive departments. Many of these promotional activities relate directly to the agenda of the Assembly, for example, financing for development, HIV/AIDS, small islands and other issues for which the Department undertakes special promotional and media outreach campaigns. These include outreach to international media, both directly and through the network of United Nations information centres, as well as to media stationed at United Nations Headquarters. As part of these campaigns, press kits and other special print and online products are prepared and disseminated widely. The Department also sets up interviews with important journalists and arranges press conferences, background briefings and other interactions with the media.

5. These activities augment the work of the Spokesperson for the President of the General Assembly, who is the first point of contact between the media and the Assembly. The Spokesperson, who has traditionally been a staff member of the Department of Public Information, is responsible for giving the Assembly President communications advice and implementing a media strategy. This normally includes giving daily briefings to the United Nations press corps as part of the noon briefing of the Spokesman for the Secretary-General, being available to answer media queries about every aspect of the Assembly's work, including the Main Committees, and giving interviews and background briefings. The Spokesperson is expected to be pro-active in getting media interest and coverage of important issues on the Assembly's agenda.

6. The Department's many news services provide constant coverage in print, radio, television, photo and on the web site of the General Assembly throughout its session. The Meetings Coverage Section provides written summary-style coverage of the Assembly and its subsidiary organs. Press releases on all open meetings, are issued in English and French, in print and on the Internet. Press releases also include background information issued in advance of meetings and highlights at the conclusion of the various sessions. The activities of the Assembly's Plenary, including the two-week general debate, and the work of its six Main Committees, are covered in depth in both languages. Press officers also issue briefing notes on the activities of the Assembly and its President, as announced by the President's Spokesperson at the daily noon briefing. In an effort to broaden their reach and audience, press releases covering the deliberations of the Assembly are posted on the Internet, thus affording Internet users worldwide access to detailed information, in the two working languages, about Assembly activities. The Internet addresses are: www.un.org/apps/press/latest.asp (English) and www.un.org/apps/press/latestFrench.asp (French).

7. Press releases about the General Assembly and Assembly documents are also sent by e-mail to 83 United Nations field offices, including information centres, information services and United Nations offices, which disseminate them locally and make them available through their libraries. During the past year, 1,222 Assembly documents and 413 Assembly press releases were disseminated to these outlets. During the first two months of the fifty-eighth session of the Assembly, the volume of electronic dissemination increased by 30 per cent, as compared with the previous two-month period.

8. Coverage by United Nations Television (UNTV) of the President's activities, including his meetings and press conferences, is done on the basis of requests from the news media. If the President's meetings and other activities are announced in the

Media Alert (see below) they are covered automatically by UNTV. It is up to the President's office to provide the Department of Public Information with the information for the *Media Alert*. Television coverage of General Assembly meetings is automatic until 5.45 p.m. (after which time the Department must pay overtime to the television crews). The general debate and other important meetings are covered gavel to gavel, as are special and emergency sessions. All UNTV coverage is offered as a pool feed to any interested broadcaster, and is available either live or taped. Every day, including during the Assembly session and other peak periods, the Department also produces daily television news packages, which are provided free of charge to major international television news syndicators, including Associated Press television, Reuters television and others. UNTV also covers important discussions in the Main Committees. The daily briefing by the Spokesperson for the President of the Assembly is always covered by UNTV and is webcast live on the United Nations web site. The Department produces a weekly television interview programme in English, "World Chronicle", which regularly features guests and issues relating to the work of the Assembly.

9. United Nations Radio sends daily live and taped broadcasts to 140 radio stations in 75 countries. These news broadcasts and feature programmes reach an estimated 130 million listeners in seven different languages. In all new sessions of the General Assembly, United Nations Radio provides extensive coverage of the various issues on its agenda, including special meetings, observances and other important activities. The inaugural statement of the new Assembly President is highlighted in United Nations Radio programmes to give listeners a sense of what the President considers to be the priority issues and his vision for the session. Likewise, at the end of the President's term, United Nations Radio usually highlights his assessment of the achievements of the session. Interviews with the President are also incorporated into programmes on different issues. During the two-week General Debate, United Nations Radio sends, free of charge, audio feeds of the statements of heads of State and/or Government, as well as foreign ministers of all least developed countries, to the national radio networks of the respective Member States. Between 25 to 35 per cent of the content of United Nations Radio's live broadcasts and programmes is devoted to coverage of issues discussed in Assembly and/or its Main Committees during the period of the session.

10. The Department provides photo coverage of all speakers in the general debate and other important meetings of the General Assembly, as well as coverage of important activities of the President. Photographs in high resolution format are sent via file transfer protocol to the media and other regular users and they are also posted on the United Nations web site. During the general debate in 2003, 1,086 high-resolution photographs were downloaded from the file transfer protocol server by users in 31 different countries.

11. Through the Media Documents Centre at United Nations Headquarters, the Department distributes information about the General Assembly to journalists based in New York, as well as to delegates and United Nations staff. Staff of the Department collect and distribute all available texts of statements made by heads of State or Government or other ministers during the general debate and during sessions of particular interest to the media. The press releases on the coverage of all open meetings, including the biographical notes of the chairmen of the Main Committees, and Assembly documents are also made available.

12. To facilitate the work of the media during peak periods of the General Assembly, the Department publishes a detailed daily listing of the many bilateral meetings taking place. It also attends to myriad requests for assistance from media crews accompanying Member State delegations. To assist the media during the Assembly session, the Department sets up a liaison desk on the third floor outside the General Assembly Hall to escort journalists to their appointments with world leaders, and/or to film in the Hall. To accommodate and service the very large number of correspondents covering the Assembly's general debate, a special media centre is set up, equipped with computers, Internet access and television monitors with multi-language audio, and with provision for live television and radio feeds that make immediate relays possible worldwide. Broadcast media interested in making documentary films on the work of the Assembly are assisted in doing so. A daily *Media Alert* of United Nations activities open to coverage by the media — meetings, press conferences, special events — helps publicize the Assembly and its President year-round.

13. In order to accelerate the media accreditation process for General Assembly and other coverage, the Department has launched a new web site at www.un.org/media/accreditation.

14. The work of the General Assembly receives extensive and prominent coverage on the United Nations News Centre web portal. It is one of the most heavily visited parts of the United Nations web site. During the first three months of the Assembly's current session, for instance, the English version of the site received an average of 4 million page views (over 12 million hits). News stories from the News Centre, which is now available in all official languages, are also distributed daily in English and French to over 23,000 subscribers of its e-mail service, among them major media organizations, government agencies, non-governmental organizations and educational institutions. Subscribers can choose to receive news stories continuously throughout the day as they are posted on the News Centre site, or receive the daily news summary that is e-mailed at the end of the day. In addition, a growing number of external web sites have created direct links to the News Centre, thus substantially increasing exposure to the stories covering the work of the Assembly. Stories from the News Centre are continuously posted on, or linked to, a wide array of web sites and media outlets, including the United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) and Xinhua news agencies, ArabicNews.com, UN Wire, the web sites related to the United Nations Association of the United States of America, WorldNews.com, AllAfrica.com, PalestineChronicle.com, GlobalSecurity.org and many others.

15. Outreach activities to civil society, including educational outreach (which is now an integral activity of the Department of Public Information), have emerged as key tools for promoting understanding of the work of the General Assembly. In 2003, the Department's United Nations information centres provided assistance to 87 Model United Nations — or mock sessions of United Nations legislative organs — organized with students around the world. In 2002, the information centres provided assistance to 51 such Model United Nations. In addition, the Department hosts high school and collegiate National Model United Nations Conferences at Headquarters and its staff assist with many Model United Nations in North America. It also arranges tours, briefings and visiting speakers for many other individual student delegations and regional Model United Nations that take place at various schools and universities throughout North and Central America and the

Caribbean. Since the Model United Nations sessions often take the form of a General Assembly debate, these activities are an excellent way of educating young people about the importance of the Assembly and its relevance to their lives.

16. The Department maintains an extensive web site for Model United Nations on its Cyberschoolbus web site at www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/modelun/index.asp. The Model United Nations discussion area, part of the Cyberschoolbus web site, is an example of what the Department does to promote this important student activity. In addition, a new feature called "Ask an Ambassador" is growing in popularity. It offers students around the world the opportunity to ask a different United Nations Ambassador each month about foreign policy and global issues that are debated in the General Assembly. This feature is currently available in English, French and Spanish. So far ambassadors from China, Egypt, India, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, Spain, South Africa and Switzerland have participated.

17. The *UN Works* programme and the Global Teaching and Learning Project both develop educational content that support the priorities established by the General Assembly. *UN Works* does it through collaborations with media and entertainment companies and by maintaining a corresponding web site where the public can learn how the United Nations works to improve people's lives and how to get involved. The Global Teaching and Learning Project supports these priorities with collaborative online projects, information, and lesson plans that are distributed online and in print.

18. Each year, the third issue of the *UN Chronicle* magazine, published in the six official languages of the United Nations, includes a detailed interview with the incoming President of the General Assembly that highlights the main items on the agenda as well as the President's expectations of his or her term of office. Issue No. 4 always includes a summary of the general debate and the first issue of the subsequent year provides a complete coverage of the Assembly session and the work of its Main Committees. These articles are further disseminated by the *UN Chronicle* Unit through its *UN Chronicle* online edition, *UN Chronicle* E-Alert and *UN Chronicle* Feature Service. To assist in such coverage, a staff member is hired on general temporary assistance to prepare material on the work of the Assembly.

19. When it is in session, the General Assembly is also the highlight of the Department's guided tours. On days when visitor traffic is particularly high, an abbreviated tour is offered, restricted to the General Assembly and Security Council. This has proved to be very popular. Over 350,000 visitors from more than 130 countries took the guided tour in 2003.

III. Developing a communications strategy on publicizing the work and decisions of the General Assembly: recommendations

20. The many activities already being undertaken by the Department of Public Information serve to help generate media coverage and awareness about the work of the General Assembly. These activities are augmented by the work of the Spokesperson for the President of the General Assembly. Should a formal communications strategy be developed, aimed at better publicizing the work and decisions of the Assembly, the issues presented below would need to be addressed.

A. Staffing

Spokesperson for the President of the General Assembly

21. It has been a tradition over several decades to assign a senior officer from the Department of Public Information to serve as Spokesperson for the President of the General Assembly. The individual is selected by the incoming President from a short list of candidates who are from the same region as the President and/or who are fluent in the language spoken by the President, should this be an official language other than English. Although the Spokesperson is available to the President for the full one-year term, normally the Spokesperson only serves full time during the four months from September to December during the first part of the Assembly session. For the rest of the year, the Department's staff member is expected to carry out his/her normal duties in addition to duties as Spokesperson. If the Assembly decides to be in session year round, the Department ensures that the Spokesperson is assigned for the full year, full time for the first four months (September to December) and part time from then on.

Assistant to the Spokesperson

22. Like the President of the General Assembly, the Spokesperson changes every year. Currently there is no assistant or permanent staff member to keep the Spokesperson's office going from year to year. As a result, there are no files or records passed on from one Spokesperson to the next and no other institutional arrangements that would enable new Spokespersons to benefit from the experience of their predecessors. Thus the Spokesperson has very little, if any, access to institutional memory. Many new Spokespersons are unable to provide immediate assistance, since it can take some weeks to determine where best to find information and guidance on the issues before the Assembly. It would be beneficial if the decision on a Spokesperson could be made by the new President soon after his or her election, some three months before the opening of the General Assembly. If such a decision is forthcoming, the Department of Public Information would henceforward release the new Spokesperson at the beginning of August to follow and observe the current Spokesman, thus allowing the new Spokesperson to gain valuable experience and enabling him/her to be fully informed by the opening of the session.

23. A partial solution to the problem of the Spokesperson having to "reinvent the wheel" each year would be to have an assistant allocated to that office on a permanent basis. The assistant would keep permanent files and records that would ensure that key information gets passed on from one year to the next and thereby provide institutional memory, continuity and effective support for the Spokesperson. It would be desirable to augment the office of the President of the General Assembly with a senior General Service post to be assigned as information assistant to the Spokesperson for the President. This position could also be responsible for maintaining and updating the President's web site, under the guidance of the Spokesperson. The Department of Public Information, which has a low General Service vacancy rate, currently has no position available for this function. However, should the present report be approved by the Assembly, the Department would make every effort to identify a position for that purpose. Actual and projected costs relating to this would be reported to the Assembly in the context of the budget performance report for the biennium.

B. Web site

24. In recent years, the web site of the President of the General Assembly has assumed greater importance as a portal to share information about the Assembly. While the site for the Assembly is maintained in all official languages by the Website Section, some Presidents in the past had assigned the responsibility for updating and maintaining the site to the Spokesperson or to an intern working for the Spokesperson. Each year, the incoming President's office has asked the Website Section to redesign the web site completely, thus losing all continuity and user identification. The new President's staff have to be retrained by the Website Section each year. Sometimes it can take weeks for the new President's staff to be fully ready to maintain the site. To ensure continuity, day-to-day updating of the web site of the President should be carried out by the core staff of the President's office, in close cooperation with the Website Section.

C. Relations with the media

25. The President of the General Assembly traditionally issues statements to the media on international days and other events. Rarely do these get coverage in the media, primarily because of the large number of these messages and their inherent lack of substance and strategic direction. These messages might have more impact if their content and timing were part of a communications strategy designed to explain the importance of the role of the Assembly, rather than being dictated solely by the purpose of the event or international day. In order to attract media attention, such messages need to be timely, pithy, relate to people's lives and/or the daily news, be translated into the official languages and be disseminated more widely.

26. The Department of Public Information issues as press releases all the messages of the President of the General Assembly in English and French. If the President is from a country using another official United Nations language, there are currently no arrangements in place to ensure translations of such messages and statements. The web-based United Nations News Centre highlights his important statements and United Nations Radio runs excerpts and quotes on the daily radio news. The Department could also assist by disseminating important messages at the national level through the network of United Nations information centres.

27. For an important issue, the President of the General Assembly might wish to author an opinion or op-ed article. The placement of these in appropriate global media could be coordinated through the Department of Public Information and issued around the world through United Nations information centres. This could help generate more understanding about the role of the Assembly among opinion leaders. Two or three such articles might be placed per year.

28. The President should also hold regular press conferences (every few months) with the United Nations press corps to keep them apprised of his views and concerns about the work of the General Assembly. Smaller informal group or one-on-one meetings with journalists should also be arranged by the Spokesperson on a more frequent basis, so that the President could provide background information and get to know the United Nations Correspondents Association members. When the President travels, the Department of Public Information could provide assistance in setting up media opportunities in the various countries where it has information

centres. At the beginning of each General Assembly session, and periodically throughout the year as needed, the President's staff should also brief the Department about what they consider the important upcoming issues and about the main activities of the President. This would assist the Department's staff in ensuring effective coverage of these important issues and activities.

IV. Conclusions

29. In his report on strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for further change (A/57/387 and Corr.1), the Secretary-General laid out a plan to revitalize the General Assembly, including by rationalizing its agenda and streamlining its functions. The President of the General Assembly has also initiated a process of consultations with Member States to improve the Assembly's efficiency and working methods. These efforts could be supported by developing a communications strategy to better position the Assembly and explain its importance. As part of this, a targeted media campaign could help publicize the Assembly's work and decisions.

30. As can be seen from the present report, the Department of Public Information is already working to this end, undertaking a great number of activities to promote and publicize the Assembly's work and the issues it addresses. A closer working relationship between the Office of the President of the General Assembly and the Department, as well as between the Spokesperson for the President of the Assembly and the Office of the Spokesman for the Secretary-General, could help position these activities more strategically.